



KEEP THE PROMISE COALITION
Community Solutions, *Not* Institutions!
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**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee
April 1, 2011
In Favor of HB 6638; In Opposition to SB 1164**

Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Fox and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Cheri Bragg, Coordinator of Keep the Promise Coalition, comprised of people living with mental illness, family members, providers, and advocates dedicated to ensuring that a comprehensive, community mental health system is created and sustained in Connecticut.

The Coalition is in favor of HB 6638, An Act Concerning Juvenile Justice. This bill would help ensure smooth, on-time implementation of "Raise the Age" for 17 year olds through statutory changes. All but eleven states nationally have legislated that children under the age of 18 are not automatically prosecuted as an adult. There are several reasons that Connecticut should follow suit.

Connecticut was able to successfully implement "Raise the Age" for 16 year olds in 2010. In fact, due to better than anticipated capacity, less than anticipated costs, and a shrinking juvenile justice system, **there is much more room to absorb 17 year olds than anticipated.**

Serving 17 year olds through timely, age appropriate, community services and supports, including Family Support Centers and diversion programs, is better for families and less costly than residential options. Addressing those issues that can best be served in the community through needed family supports and services is clearly a much more cost-effective option for tax payers and encourages positive family outcomes. Promoting a smooth transition from youth into young adulthood is an investment in the success and healthy outcomes of our communities.

In addition, **kids who are tried in the juvenile system show lower recidivism rates than those tried in the adult system**, which underlines both the case for cost-effectiveness as well as positive, future outcomes for young people and future generations in Connecticut. **This is especially important for young people who have serious mental illnesses who are statistically more likely to get caught up in the costly, criminal justice system rather than receive the cost-effective healthcare they need.** Studies show that the brain does not fully develop until about

age 25. If you have a serious mental illness, supports and services are often the key to navigating the transition from youth to young adulthood along with all of the accompanying major decisions made during this time period. Youth in need of supports and services, including mental health, would have better outcomes, including employment, receiving the healthcare and supports they need in the community vs. being incarcerated.

The Coalition is opposed to the proposal to delay "Raise the Age" implementation for 17 year olds in **SB 1164** for all the reasons outlined above. Some Coalition members who have had criminal justice involvement, particularly during young adulthood, relay to us that it is clear to them now that they needed mental health care, but that they didn't realize it at the time. Keeping 17-year-old's in the youth system they belong in so they can access the age-appropriate services they need makes sense. Raising the Age is the right thing to do for our youth and families in Connecticut and the fiscally responsible choice for our state's economy.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.